

Sifting Through History

MoDOT welcomes the public at two archaeological sites

When MoDOT builds a new road or bridge, it's usually thinking about an area's future. Occasionally, however, something unexpected is found. It may be an artifact, burial mound or some other evidence of prehistoric humanity. When that happens, MoDOT is bound by federal law to change its focus.

The Silver Creek/Plato Site

By Eddie Grover-Bisker

Nestled deep in the rural Ozark hills lies the small village of Plato, Mo., about 33 miles southeast of Lebanon. Strangers rarely venture this far off the beaten path, but if they had in late October, they would have seen something strangely out of place – an archaeological dig. The researchers and their work were big news in the tiny town and the subject of many discussions down at Weber's Café.

New Bridges At Last

MoDOT had been watching two old bridges on Route 32 closely since 1985 and was planning to replace them and straighten the road. Both bridges were constructed in 1934, and were not equipped to handle modern traffic loads or vehicle types. Narrow lanes and no shoulders created hazardous

conditions for drivers crossing either bridge. Similarly, the alignment and roadbed of Route 32 were constructed in 1935 and were no longer satisfactory for present-day traffic.

Area residents couldn't have been more supportive of the project at the public meeting held at the high school in 1995. Many people commented, "I wish the new bridges were built yesterday." They were thrilled to hear the project was scheduled to start in 2003.

Then, in the summer of 2000, the Silver Creek archaeological site was discovered during a routine survey of properties that would be impacted by the new bridges and highway improvements being planned.

Subsequent testing indicated the site was a treasure trove of significant artifacts. Due to the site's potential to provide valuable information on prehistoric occupation in the Gasconade River drainage basin, MoDOT decided to proceed with an intensive excavation.

At first, people were worried the dig would delay the project. But after assurances from MoDOT that there would be no delays, residents began to enjoy their newfound notoriety.

Opening the Site

MoDOT usually does not allow public access to work sites, especially archaeological excavations. However, MoDOT Cultural Resources staff recognized the Silver Creek site





A MoDOT archaeologist shows a group of students the finer points of shovel-skimming for artifacts.



Screening dirt can reveal hidden artifacts.



Flotation allows lighter materials like prehistoric seeds, nuts, charcoal, bone and fish scales to surface and tell their story.

provided an ideal opportunity to teach rural students about local prehistory, archaeology and MoDOT's project process.

The response of area schools was overwhelming. In fact, MoDOT set up tours for every 30 minutes during the first week of the dig. In all, nearly 1,100 students toured the site in two weeks – some from as far away as West Plains, a two-hour bus ride in the

“The importance of this site lies in its age, location and integrity,” Tesreau explains. “This site has not been previously disturbed, and it contains important information about this time in history that has not been recovered elsewhere. It is very exciting for us to have this opportunity.”

In all, MoDOT recovered thousands of artifacts characteristic of the Maramec

Springs phase of the Late Woodland period (1000 - 400 B.C.), including projectile points and other chipped-stone tools (drills, scrapers and burin), ground-stone tools (metates) and pottery fragments. After the hand-excavation was completed, a backhoe was used to mechanically strip the remaining area of the site. Using heavy equipment, crews recovered approximately 10,000 more artifacts including several hundred stone tools.

“The initial results of the excavation suggest that the area was a lithic-production area, where stone tools were made,” says Principal Investigator Michael Meyer. “Based upon our work and comparisons drawn from other similar sites, it can be assumed that the site is much larger than the area excavated and that it extends well beyond MoDOT right of way. It is likely that the central portion of the site, which lies beyond the current project limits, contains the hearths and other significant features that we were looking for.”

“The importance of this site lies in its age, location, and integrity.”

Travis Tesreau, archaeology crew chief

cold and misting rain – to learn about preserving artifacts of long-forgotten cultures.

About 140 teachers and others also visited the site. Volunteers from Fort Leonard Wood, the Department of Natural Resources and the National Forest Service assisted MoDOT during the excavation.

Digging In

During the first week of fieldwork, Crew Chief Travis Tesreau and Archaeology Assistant Terry Martin escorted school groups through the site. The remainder of the crew excavated the area by hand.

Travis Tesreau, archaeology crew chief, tells a group of Plato students what was found at the site.





MoDOT staff and local volunteers get the chance to dig at the Pendleton site.

Post-Analysis

The excavated artifacts were sent to the Cultural Resources laboratory in Jefferson City to be processed and analyzed. When the final report is completed, they'll be stored for further research or sent to museums for display, Tesreau explains.

The Cultural Resources crew never knows for certain what they'll find. But they are always precise and respectful. After all, their work zone has a powerful history.

Eddie Grover-Bisker is the Public Information and Outreach manager for MoDOT's South Central District.

The Pendleton Site

By Kristin Gerber

Central Missouri is home to the state capital, the Mizzou Tigers, the Missouri State Fair and the Lake of the Ozarks. Recently, Missouri's mid-section also became a site for Missourians to dig in and help uncover the history of our state.

In June 2002, MoDOT provided the public with the opportunity to find out how Missouri's original natives lived thousands of years ago. An archaeological site was opened on Route 52 between Tuscumbia and St. Elizabeth in Miller County.

The Pendleton Site, named after the previous owner of the property, was discovered during a routine survey while MoDOT



The joy of discovery

staff prepared to replace the Panther Creek Bridge. At that time, archaeologists unearthed objects they believed dated back to 3,000-600 B.C., including stone tools used for hunting and fire hearths used for cooking.

"This site was a significant find for us because of the age and nature of the artifacts," says Aaron Anglen, MoDOT archaeology assistant for Cultural Resources. "We realized that it was a wonderful opportunity to involve the public in the search for artifacts so they could learn more about the history



Important materials can be hidden beyond arm's reach.

of the people who once lived there. It also provided a chance to inform the public about MoDOT's efforts to preserve our state's culture and history."

Public Participation

For one week, the public was invited to roll up its sleeves and work alongside MoDOT archaeologists scientifically excavating the site. Equipped with sunscreen, gloves and insect repellent, citizens helped to screen, dig and record notes and measurements.

Local media videotaped, photographed and wrote about the activities at Pendleton and encouraged the public to visit. Both young and old were invited to take part, and several hundred did.

The Pendleton site is believed to have been a seasonal base camp about 5,000 years ago during the Late Archaic Period. This is the first known period for pottery making and

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Aaron Anglen, archaeology assistant



A MoDOT archaeologist shows students and volunteers how to use a Munsell Soil Color Chart.



Cultural Resources shares its treasures at the state fair.

the first documented use of domesticated plants like squash and bottle gourds in the state of Missouri.

Some of the artifacts found at Pendleton were displayed at the Missouri State Fair in August. MoDOT staffers were on hand to answer questions and demonstrate how items like spear points were made and used. Interested crowds gathered as MoDOT archaeologists described the people who inhabited the region ages ago.

Callaway Farms

Pendleton was not the first mid-Missouri archaeological site MoDOT opened to the public. In 1999, more than 5,000 people visited excavation work at the Callaway Farms site just east of Wainwright on Route 94 in Callaway County. This site was discovered when MoDOT began planning for a series of bridge replacements along Route 94.

Radiocarbon testing indicated the Callaway Farms site was approximately 3,000 years old and revealed evidence of 10 rare prehistoric houses. The site was one of the

largest discoveries of structures dating back this far in the United States, and it received national attention.

Because of its size and significance, MoDOT opened Callaway Farms to the public for nearly six weeks. Excavated items will be stored at the University of Missouri Museum of Anthropology in Columbia after the final report is completed.

“Most people think of MoDOT as the agency responsible for building and maintaining our state highways,” says Anglen. “What they might not recognize is the responsibility MoDOT has to document and preserve history before building a road.” ■

Kristin Gerber is the Public Information and Outreach Manager for MoDOT's Central District.



As Committed to the Past as the Future

MoDOT is required by law to investigate and protect Missouri's archaeological and historical resources before embarking on a project to build or expand the highway system. The regulations primarily consider a site's research potential—that is, a site's potential to inform us about the past. As a result, MoDOT's archaeological procedures follow not only the letter of the law, but also the spirit of the law.

Here are some frequently asked questions about MoDOT Cultural Resources.

Why is it important to protect archaeological resources?

Archaeological resources are locations that contain evidence of previous human presence or activity. This can include areas or structures used for living, working, ceremonies, trade, transportation, conflict

and recreation. Missouri's human history spans 13,000 years, but only the last 200 years have a written history. That means archaeology is the only link to understanding 99 percent of the state's cultural history. Also, archaeological resources are finite and fragile. Once a site is destroyed, the information it held is lost.

What does the MoDOT archaeology staff do?

The MoDOT archaeological staff reviews every transportation project for archaeological and cultural concerns. When a proposed project will affect a site, the staff evaluates alternatives that would avoid or minimize any effects to the site, such as simple design changes, work-zone restrictions or other cost-effective measures.

Preservation is always a primary goal, but that always has to be weighed against traffic efficiency and safety. If saving an archaeological site simply is not possible,

MoDOT cultural resources staff makes sure any information the site contains is recorded and preserved.

What types of projects involve archaeological resources?

Cultural Resources staff gets involved any time a highway project might disturb the ground and potentially affect archaeological resources. Projects could range from installing guardrail, erecting highway signs and staging equipment, to larger-scale efforts like widening pavement, replacing a bridge or realigning a roadway.

In each case, some preliminary work would be required to determine if any cultural resources might be disturbed. Depending on the results of initial testing, Cultural Resources' involvement could extend from minimal excavation to large-scale data recovery if the site cannot be preserved. ■